

ART

AMAZONS OF RUSSIAN ALTERNATIVE ART

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We all know the Amazons of Russian Avant-Garde. While the majority of radical and innovative artistic movements in Europe were based on the image of a male artist genius (and as [Carol Duncan argued](#) their need to assert their domination and virility through their art) Russian example offered something different. The unprecedented number of women artists were actively involved in the movement. As the curators of the [iconic exhibition in Guggenheim](#) demonstrated, never before in the history of Western art had women played so vital a role in the formation of a revolutionary cultural enterprise, one that redefined traditional aesthetic values and remapped age-old divisions between art and life. Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova were among those whose drive to discover “new bases of artistic creation” was recognised and studied in exhibitions and publications on equal terms with their male colleagues.



Varvara Stepanova

What happened, however, after the romanticised revolutionary impulses faded away? What role did female artists play in the Soviet period? It won't be difficult for an informed reader to name a few artists of that time: Ilya Kabakov, Andrei Monastyrky, Eric Bulatov, Oscar Rabin, Vitaly Komar... the godfathers of alternative art in Russia. But how many female artists can you remember?

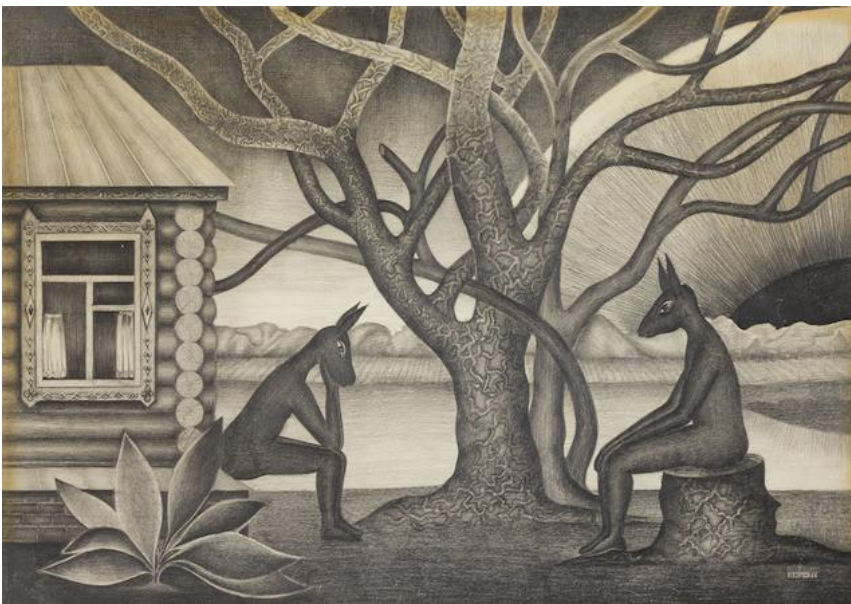
On the occasion of the upcoming International Woman's Day we look back at practices of 5 artists who made significant contributions to the development of artistic and cultural life. (Well done those who knew them all without our reminders!)

VALENTINA KROPIVNITSKAIA



Valentina Kropivnitskaya; Oskar Rabine with their son Alexandre Rabine Image: NPG

Born in 1924 Valentina Kropivnitskaya was always in the midsts of artistic life. Her father, Evgeny Kropivnitsky, was artist and poet. After being expelled from the artists union he continued to work as a tutor in amateur art groups and classes. The *barak* on Dolgoprudnaia where they lived became an important spot on the map of alternative art life in Moscow: Igor Kholin, Genrikh Sapgir, Vsevolod Nekrasov. Oscar Rabin and others gathered there to talk about art and life.



Valentina Kropivnitskaia. Sunset

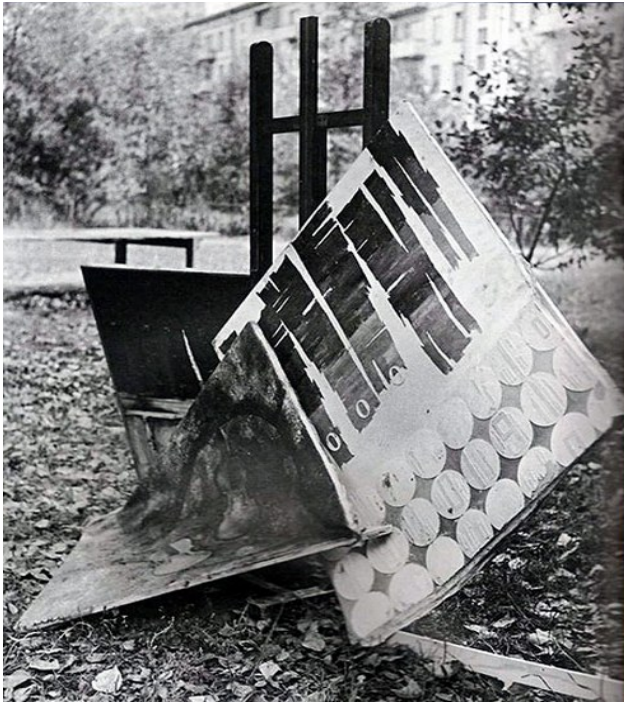
In 1978 together with her husband Oscar Rabin and their son Aleksander Valentina moved to France. Always being in the shadow of her famous husband, she created a significant body of works. One of the most cherished of her subjects were mysterious and contemplative creatures with large and sad eyes. In 2007 the Pushkin Museum hastened an exhibition where Valentina Kropivnitskaia's works were shown next to the works of her husband and son.

LIDIA MASTERKOVA



Lidia Masterkova. Photo by Igor Palmin

Lidia Masterkova is often named as the “amazon of the second Russian Avant-Garde”. And rightly so, as her determination, devotion to her own ideas and endless artistic experimentations make it easy to draw the parallels with the artists of the early XX century. She started to experiment with obstruction at the same time with her husband, Vladimir Nemukhin, after visiting the exhibition of modern Western art in 1957 (dedicated to the Moscow festival of youth and students). Nemukhin writes: “It was a real shock, but the shock of healing, after which we finally saw the light. I still remember well when I returned home after this exhibition: crushed, shaken. Together with Lydia Masterkova we sat silently, and each in our own thoughts. The very next day Masterkova makes an abstract composition. And then I wrote my first abstraction — landscape motif “Blue day””.



Lidia Masterkova's abstraction after the Bulldozer exhibition. September 1974

Masterkova was the only female artist to be included in the notorious Bulldozer exhibition and, according to some accounts, the first one to fearlessly uncover her works in front of the bulldozers and police.



Lydia Alekseevna Masterkova Untitled, 1965 Oil and fabric collage on canvas Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union Photo Peter Jacobs 2006

Her early abstract works are dominated by powerful colours revealing her desire to exist outside of the rules and regulations. Her later explorations of abstraction was influenced not only by Western art, however, but also by Russian abstraction of the early XX century and tradition of icons. In her refined, almost monochromatic collages she experimented with materials using lace, old fabrics and brocade traditionally used in the vestments of clergy. This makes her works very "feminine", but in her own masterful and influential way

NATALIA ABALAKOVA



Natalia Abalakova, Anatoly Zhigalov

While the practice of Valentina Kropivnitskaya developed independently of her husband, and Lidia Masterkova and Vladimir Nemukhin were always in a dialogue developing their own approaches to abstraction, Natalia Abalakova chose another path. After more than a decade when she and her husband Anatoly Zhigalov worked independently, they joined their forces. Such collaboration inevitably posed the question of gender. As Abalakova comments one of their first action, *A Flower Wake*, 1980, was an exploration of the myth of male and female elements.



TOTART. *A Flower Wake*. 1980



TOTART. A Flower Wake. 1980

Zhigalov claims, however, the essence of their collaboration was the work on one common project, which would eventually erase their individuality as independent artists. Such projects were the Exploration of the Essence of Art in relation to Life and Art. It was an ironic conceptual meta-work including various paintings, installations, text and performances aimed to explore the field of art and culture.



TOTART. Dukhovka and Netlenka

They adopted the name TOTART – total art action – which they also explained as a definition of total art in totalitarian state. Their following works were humorous and thought-provoking references both to Russian avant-garde and the conceptual art of the 1970s. Mocking the later

conceptualists for their preoccupations with spiritual matters and their endless searches for answers to eternal questions TOTART, for example, turned the most routine household objects, the hob and the fridge in works of art, inscribing on the *dukhuovka* and *netlenka*. While the former is formed from the root *dukh* meaning spirit and in this diminutive form translates as oven, the latter means imperishable in indistinguishable.

RIMMA GERLOVINA



Rimma Gerlovina, *Mirror cube*, 1975, Visual prove that one is always on that side of the cube, which one is facing .

Another artists of the same generation as Natalia Abalakova, who also worked in a close collaboration with her husband is Rimma Gerlovina. Her work combined the interest in the conceptual art in Europe and America and the peculiarities of Soviet art environment.

Gerlovina experimented with the visual prose and poetry and later created a series of small cubes inscribed on each side and inside with typed text. As she recollects: "In 1974, little cubes, the portable objects of three-dimensional poetry, burst forth as if a fountain, overflowing our entire apartment in Moscow. Made with one breath, they were given away as gifts to our friends, artists, and poets, with easiness and spontaneity." In 1975, the small boxes grew into the Cubes-Environments, the series of the projects, in which the spectator is turned into a performer asked to angles with cubes in different ways.



Rimma Gerlovina, *The cube boxes*. 1974

While the artists were still living in Moscow, their works were frequently smuggled abroad. During the Eastern European Biennial in Venice in 1977, the international press picked up their performance *Zoo* – in which they were seated naked in a cage labeled “*Homo sapiens*, a group of mammals, male and female” – as a symbol of the of Russian culture being put in a cage by the Soviet regime. As one might expect, this focal event created unwanted problems for the artists that subsequently led to their departure to the states.



Rimma Gerlovina, Valeriy Gerlovin, performance *Zoo – Homo Sapiens*, Feb.17,1977, Moscow. Photo by Victor Novatsky

IRINA NAKHOVA



Irina Nakhova. Teaching

While we all know Ilya Kabakov's environments we often forget that Irina Nakhova is considered to be an author of the first Russian "total installations". In the early 1980s, using one of the rooms in her Moscow apartment, Nakhova embarked on a series of environments entitled "Rooms".



Irina Nakhova. (Untitled) from the series Rooms, 1983-1987. Photo: Zimmerli Museum

There were four rooms created between 1983 and 1986, each of which was "displayed" for a fortnight/ For a taste of what those works were like one might look back at the recent recreation of *Room No. 2* in Tate Modern. For this work Nakhova removed the furniture from the 4 x 4 m² living room of her apartment, covered the surfaces with white paper and layered them with grey and black shapes. There, she experimented with disorientating those who stepped into the space, 'wanting to show pictorial space and kind of get inside it, and on the other hand, to simply destroy the space that's around me'.



Irina Nakhova. *The Green Pavillion*

Nakhova was the first female artist to have a solo exhibition in the Russian Pavillion at the Venice Biennale. Her three-part installation *The Green Pavillion* was a look at our relationship with history and the future.

Instead of conclusion I want to warn to the reader that the list is by no means limited by these 5 figures. Rather than satisfying the interest in what female art in the Soviets looked like, this article is aimed at provoking further investigations. The other important point I want to make is that this piece does not intend to claim that we shall always think in the categories of male and female art. On the contrary, art-making should not be defined by our physical gender. The intention of this short overview was to remind the reader tha
